Acupuncture for Low Back Pain in the Pediatric Patient

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Introduction
Lower back pain is a common symptom in patients seeking medical attention. Lumbago is also not an uncommon complaint in the pediatric population. It is estimated that the prevalence of back pain was low (1%) among 7-year-old and 10-year-old (6%) schoolchildren, but increased with age, being 18% both among 14- and 16-year-old adolescents. Recurrent or chronic pain was reported by 26% of boys and 33% of girls who reported low back pain, and the proportion of recurrent and chronic pains of all low back pain incidents increased with age.  

Acupuncture, a modality practiced in China for over 3000 years, has become more popular in the United States since the 1970’s. In 1997 the NIH released a consensus statement noting that acupuncture is efficacious in adult postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting and in postoperative dental pain and may be may be a useful adjunct treatment or an acceptable alternative in other situations including low back pain. In a meta-analysis of twelve randomized controlled trials, mainly in adults, acupuncture was found to be superior to various control interventions for the management of lumbago.

Methods
With approval from the Institutional Review Board at Children’s Hospital Boston, we reviewed 9 charts of pediatric patients who underwent at least a series of six acupuncture treatments for a primary complaint of low back pain. Patients were asked to rate their pain prior to treatment on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 indicated no pain at all and 10 was the greatest pain they had ever experienced.

Results
Nine patients were followed in a seven year period (1999-2006) with an average age of 16.2 on presentation to the medical acupuncture service for complaint of low back pain. The male to female ratio was 0.67 (3 boys and 6 girls). The average pain score at the first treatment was 5.5 (range 3-8.5). Over time the average pain score decreased, and the average pain score on the sixth visit was 3.78 (range 1-6.5).

Discussion
Our results indicate that treatment with acupuncture over time decreases reported pain scores in pediatric patients. A randomized control trial of 298 patients with low back pain revealed that acupuncture was more effective in improving pain than no acupuncture treatment. Additionally, acupuncture care for low back pain is a cost effective therapy in the long term. We anticipate that similar results occur in the pediatric population, and suggest that further randomized controlled trials evaluating the efficacy and cost-effectiveness for lumbago in the pediatric patient be performed.